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ABSTRACT

Noting that an effective partnership between school and home can be one of the most powerful ways of helping children learn, this book provides guidelines for developing a whole school approach to working with parents to governors, parents, teachers, and other staff. Offering a wide range of good practice and practical ideas for developing an appropriate school policy, the guide consists of three parts. The first part deals with creating a policy and covers the following steps: getting started, developing a policy, writing a policy, and putting policy into practice. The second part presents a variety of policy options and strategies such as making first contact, welcoming, listening to and involving parents, fundraising, and the school-community partnership. The third part deals with keeping the policy under review. A summary of parents' rights in education is included. (AP)

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GUIDELINES

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Developing a whole school approach to working with parents

It takes a whole village to educate a child

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DEVELOPING A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO WORKING WITH PARENTS

It takes a whole village to educate a child

African Proverb

Why work with parents

Parents are a child's first educator. Home background is the most important influence on a child's achievement at school and in later life. Children spend less than fifteen per cent of waking time in school between birth and the age of sixteen. Parents or carers are responsible for eighty five per cent of the time.

Schools can do a great deal to support and encourage parents to take an active role in their child's education. An effective partnership between school and home can be one of the most powerful ways of helping children learn. Parents and teachers can also learn from each other, making the school a learning community.

Recent legislation has increased the importance of working with parents. Schools are required to report to parents on their children's progress, to provide information on the curriculum, to include parents' representatives on governing bodies, and to hold an annual meeting for all parents. School inspections also include a questionnaire and a public meeting for parents. Inspection reports will comment on relationships with parents.

Using the guidelines

These guidelines aim to help governors, parents, teachers and other staff develop a whole school approach to working with parents. They draw together a wide range of good practice, much of it based on Waltham Forest schools. They are not a blueprint to be followed, but some practical ideas to help develop an appropriate policy for your school.

Many of the suggestions apply to nursery, primary, secondary or special schools, but the *way* in which they apply to particular school will obviously be very different. In particular, special schools will be expected to follow the Guidelines for Special Education Needs.

Every school is different, and the process of developing work with parents will be different in every school. The process is important, and the starting point is the school and its parents. These guidelines aim to help you with that process.

Training materials and support are available for schools, governing bodies and parents groups who wish to use these guidelines for training sessions through the Education Centre.

Contents

1. Creating a policy	Page no
Getting Started	3
Developing a policy	3
Writing a policy	5
Policy into practice: keeping parents on the agenda	5
2. Policy options	
Making first contact: the welcoming school	6
Welcoming newcomers	7
Listening to parents	7
Keeping Contact: breaking down barriers	8
Home visits	9
Equality of participation	10
Class and home-school associations	11
School as a community: parents and the pastoral curriculum	11
Reporting to parents	11
Parents evenings/consultations	12
Curriculum meetings	13
Supporting Learning at Home	13
Homework policy	15
Involving parents in school	15
Involving parents in class	16
Visits and outings	16
Parents and community rooms	17
Parents as learners	17
Participation in policy-making	18
Parent-teacher associations	18
Fundraising & community events	19
Governing bodies	19
Moving on: life transitions	20
Support for staff	20
The school-community partnership	21
3. Keeping the policy under review	21
What Ofsted inspections are looking for	22
4. Summary	24
Parents' rights in education	25

Creating a policy

The process of writing a whole school policy is a way of acknowledging and sharing good practice within the school. It enables everyone to pool their views and experience. It is also a way of agreeing priorities, describing what you want to happen and setting out a plan of action to achieve it.

A written policy is also useful for new parents, staff and governors joining the school. It can be used for staff training and development. By reviewing the policy regularly, it can also be used to measure progress.

The policy on working with parents should be part of the whole school planning process, with cross references to other working documents such as the Staff Handbook, Prospectus, and policies for the curriculum, equal opportunities, special needs as well as the school's Institutional Development Plan (IDP).

1.1 Getting Started

A good way of drawing up a policy is for the Governing Body to form a group of people representing different sections of the school community - parents, teachers, governors, support staff and perhaps even older children. If possible, different faith communities and cultures should be represented as well. The group should not be too large - two or three parents, one or two teachers, one or two support staff gives you five or six people.

If it is not possible to form a working group and the task is delegated to one or two people, it is worth identifying a 'reference group' of individuals from different sections of the school community who can be consulted informally at each stage of the process.

The Governing Body should agree aims and terms of reference for the group, and a time table. It is also helpful for the Governing Body to have an open discussion on the purpose and priorities of parental involvement before the group starts, so that these can be taken into account.

It is essential that key decision-makers in the school support the idea of having a policy on parental involvement. These include the Headteacher, staff group and Governing Body.

1.2 Developing a policy

The first step is for the group to decide **why** it wants to involve parents and what the **priorities** should be. This would be a **draft** statement at this stage of the process. There are several exercises which may help you do this.

The next step is to **look at all existing policy statements** which refer to parents. These could be part of other policies, such as language or reading policy, admissions policy or policy on behaviour and discipline.

It is worth **listing all parental involvement already going on.** In many schools, there is a lot more parental involvement than any one person is aware of. Ask every member of staff what they are doing with parents.

It is very important to **ask parents what they want.** There are many different ways of doing this. In nursery and primary it is easier to talk with parents in the playground before and after school. In secondary and special schools it may be possible to ask parents informally at a parents evening, open day or school event. Inviting a cross-section of parents to an informal discussion can be very useful. Parents who do not speak English will need someone to translate, since it is particularly important to hear what these parents have to say. Schools with a large catchment area may need to make special arrangements to ensure that parents who live further away are also involved. Questionnaires can help to get parents views on specific issues, but they are often less useful for getting a feel for parents' perceptions of the school. What works best will depend on the school. It may be worth getting someone from outside the school to ask parents for you.

The most important thing is that you get a range of views, from parents in employment as well a those who are unemployed or looking after children at home, from parents of every different cultural or ethnic group in the school, from single parents as well as members of extended families, fathers as well as mothers. The census returns for the catchment area will give you general information about families living near the school, which can help put peoples' views into perspective.

Some parents' priorities may be different from those of the school. They may want or expect things which are not feasible, undesirable or even illegal, such as excluding particular groups of pupils or corporal punishment. In such cases it is particularly important to create a dialogue and mutual understanding. There is often a very wide range of views among parents and it is worth acknowledging the range of views while being very clear about where the school stands on important issues. Where the school is clear, other parents are often the most influential advocates and communicators for school policies, particularly if they have been involved in drawing up those policies in the first place!

After you have looked at existing policy and practice and canvased parents' views, it is worth looking at your draft statement of **purpose** and **priorities** again to take account of what you have found out.

Now you are in good position to draft a whole school policy.

1.3 Writing a policy

A draft policy might include -

- aims and priorities or vision
- a systematic description of all parental involvement which the school wants
- an action plan and time table for implementation,
- who is responsible for what
- costings
- an evaluation process, to look at the effectiveness of the policy in practice
- a review date, when the whole policy is reviewed.

It should aim to be achievable within existing resources and commitments. It is better to plan a series of small steps over a longer period than to try to do everything quickly with too little time or resources to do it properly.
It is worth taking the draft policy to the Governing Body for discussion and then issuing it as a **consultation document**. Consulting governors, support staff, teachers and parents will improve the policy and enable them to own it. That way it is much more likely to be put into practice.

Comments from the consultation should be considered carefully and taken into account when writing the final draft before taking it through the appropriate decision-making channels of the school for agreement and implementation.

The working group could continue as a monitoring group, to evaluate and review the policy in practice. It would only need to meet once a term or even every year to look at the way in which the policy is being put into practice, and report to the Governing Body.

The following pages suggest some points to consider when drafting a policy. It is not a draft policy, but summarizes issues, questions and headings which may help you produce a policy which works for your school.

1.4 Policy into practice: keeping parents on the agenda

The aim of a written policy is to improve children's education. This means building work with parents into the way in which teaching and learning are organized by the school. Some ways of doing this include:

- putting an aspect of work with parents on the agenda of every senior management, departmental or governors meeting

- making parents/homework part of every course plan/scheme of work

- ensure that parents are considered as part of all other planning, policy-making and budgeting.

Policy Options

2.1 Making First Contact: The Welcoming School

First impressions are lasting impressions. A good impression can begin a relationship that last for generations.

The local community is a communications network. It can work for or against the school. There are many things you can do to help the community support the school and children's education.

A negative first impression creates a barrier to every communication in future. Everything you ever want to do will have to get over that barrier time and time and time again.

A good first impression opens the door to many positive contacts in future. It is an excellent investment. It is therefore well worth the effort to make sure that every first impression leaves a good impression.

Parental involvement begins outside the school before the child is born. During the years before the child comes to your school, parents form a picture of what the school is like, what it expects of them, what they can expect of it, and what contact they will have with it. A school that really welcomes parental involvement will have new parents willing and expecting to be involved from the very first day.

Use the following points to think of ways in which the school will be seen as a welcoming school where parents want to become involved -

- school on the street: what do people say about the school? What impression do pupils and staff give?
- shops and neighbours: what do they think about the school? What do they know, and who do they know it from?
- use of the school by local communities: is it part of the community?
- use of the school by parents and children before they come to school to learn
- appearances matter: someone gets a first impression every day
- Do noticeboards inform and invite?
- Is the sign posting is clear, inclusive and welcoming?
- What messages do parents get from their first contact with the school?
- How are parents encouraged to help their children learn and prepare before they start?

- Is written information clear, comprehensive, consistent and accessible?
- Are community languages welcome, used and taken into consideration?
- Do meetings for new parents begin as you mean to continue?
- School tours for new parents: these could be led by two children or a parent, but make sure the children will be safe.
- Individual interviews with head teacher and class teacher
- Parents assessment of their own child is taken seriously
- Safe access and parking for buggies and prams
- Access and support for parents with disabilities
- Home visits (see 2.5 below)

2.2 Welcoming newcomers

Every newcomer to the school deserves the same quality of welcome, particularly parents and children who join the school after the school year begins. Ensure that they get the same information that everyone gets at the start and are helped to catch up.

It may be worth developing specific procedures for helping parents in particular circumstances, such as refugees, people living in temporary accommodation, travellers, newcomers to the area or parents whose children have been excluded from another school. For example, you could consider :

- asking individual parents to befriend and support new parents
- holding a small informal reception with a few other parents, teachers or governors
- providing information on community facilities such as local groups, adult education, libraries, playgroups and other activities or services
- having relevant contact numbers for referral in case you are asked for help
- giving all newcomers a positive introduction to other parents and staff.

2.3 Listening to parents

The most powerful way of communicating with parents is to *listen* to them. Parents are usually the best informed and most knowledgable about their child. They know more about a child's development and influences at home,which make a significant difference to their ability to learn at school.

Look at all the ways in which the school communicates with parents to see how often each parent is heard by the school and how often the parent receives information from the school. How does the school use information it receives from parents? How does the school let parents know it is acting on their views?

Listening to parents helps to increase their sense of being valued partners in their child's education, it gives the school invaluable information about each child and it enables schools to communicate better with parents. Ways of listening to parents include -

- having an individual interview and joint assessment of the child when they first join the school
- starting discussions with parents by asking how they feel their child is getting on
- holding a regular 'surgery' or drop-in sessions for parents
- ensuring that aggrieved or concerned parents can see the head teacher or senior member of staff as soon as possible
- responding promptly and considerately to parents' comments and letters
- collating comments from parents and considering them regularly in senior management or governor's meetings

Note that defensive or dismissive responses to complaints are often counter-productive. A prompt and considered response will usually be appreciated. An apology or honest explanation why something is difficult or cannot be done will often enhance the school's reputation.

2.4 Keeping Contact: breaking down barriers

Relationships can be renewed and refreshed with every meeting.
There are many different ways in which schools renew and refresh relationships with parents. These include -

- teachers of young children greet parents every morning when they arrive and see them leave with their children
- open door policy, with clear and simple guidelines to ensure safety and effectiveness
- regular time when parents come in to share activities with children, eg last half hour every Friday, last Friday of the month or last day of term: make it special!
- open invitations to assemblies and important events in school life
- invite parent representatives to give out certificates, badges and rewards

- send personal invitations to class sharing assemblies or special events, written by hand by children, using community languages where appropriate
- regular newsletter
- information on topics and curriculum displayed on noticeboards and described in newsletters
- praise notes, letting parents know every time their child does well
- prompt and friendly communication when a child is absent without permission, persistently late or in difficulty over work or behaviour
- regular social events, organised by parents and friends of the school
- class meetings/associations
- regular open days
- performances, concerts, sports days, fetes and community festivals

It is important to have clear codes about welcoming and including parents to ensure that the work of the school is enhanced rather inhibited. This means making sure everyone who comes into school is acknowledged, can easily find toilets and always has a clear role or purpose which is mutually understood. It may also mean:

- asking all adults to sign a visitors book and wear a badge
- having a policy on whether or not to invite visitors into the staff room, or creating a parents/community/guest room
- having a consistent policy on refreshments for visitors
- acknowledging and thanking visitors when they leave.

2.5 Home visits

Visiting parents at home can show parents that the school takes them seriously, it enable parents to speak on their own ground and gives teachers an insight into children's home circumstances. Home visits are more usual at nursery or special schools, but they may have a role at any age. They need to be thought through, planned and done sensitively to take account of the needs of the parent, child and teacher. Systematic visiting needs to be built into school planning and meetings schedules by negotiation, not just added onto existing responsibilities.

The most appropriate times for a home visit are -

- when a child is about to start school

- when a child has a long-term illness and cannot come to school but can do some work at home

- when a child fails to attend or parents cannot be persuaded to come to school.

The most important points about home visits are that

- visits should be by appointment by staff carrying appropriate identification

- the purpose must be clear to the parents, child and person making the visit

- the person who makes the visit must have appropriate skills, and be accompanied if there is any risk

- there is a clear and positive outcome in mind, and that parents should feel they are getting something positive from the visit.

Where possible, class teachers should make the visit, accompanied by a translator if necessary. This gives the class teacher direct experience of pupils' home circumstances. For more specialist visiting it may be appropriate to have specialist staff, such as Educational Visitors for preschool visits, multilingual workers for speakers of languages other than English, peripatetic teachers for children with special needs or Education Welfare Officers for absent children. In these circumstances it is very important that there is good systematic communication between home visitors and school based staff.

2.6 Equality of participation

The school needs to ensure that parents from all sections of the community can participate equally. This means taking account of different languages, traditions, faiths, cultures, attitudes to school and abilities. Parents will differ in their ability to offer support. Some children may be in care, temporary housing or informal foster care. Some parents or carers may be under pressure due to circumstances. Refugees, travellers and newly arrived immigrants will face particular difficulties in participating, but they may be even more anxious about their children's education.

Schools need to recognize and respond to the variety of children's home back grounds. If the school's parents have a particularly wide variety of needs, the school would be justified in seeking additional funding and support.

Very often, mothers are more actively involved with school and their child's education than fathers. It is worth developing ways of involving fathers in some way, wherever possible and appropriate. Fathers also influence their child's education and development, particularly if they are absent. A great deal of sensitivity may be necessary with separated parents. Yet positive and direct invitations to fathers need to be considered if they are not obviously involved in their child's education.

Lesbian and gay partners should also be treated with equal respect.

2.7 Class and Home-School Associations

A class association can be a good way of involving a wider cross-section of parents. A class association is simply a regular meeting for all parents of children in a class. They can be held one to three times a year. They can be particularly useful at the start of each key-stage. They can be used to discuss any issues concerning the class, including aspects of the curriculum, school policies or parents' concerns. They can be combined with social occasions to enable parents to get to know each other better. They are usually convened by the class teacher or form tutor, but a well established class association could be convened by parent representatives.

Class associations can be used as a basis for a school associations, by asking each class to nominate two parents (female and male) to represent them. Class and school associations can be a good basis for encouraging parents to join the governing body or for organizing social and fundraising activities.

When setting up class associations, it is worth starting with a new intake to make meetings a firm part of the system for communicating with parents from their start.

2.8 School as a community: the pastoral curriculum

For children to get the most out of school, it is important that parents support the school's values, ethos, rules and procedures. This means that values and rules need to be explicit and gain parents' confidence. Parents need to know that their children will be safe, treated fairly and with respect. They need to know how bullying, harassment , racism and other unacceptable behaviour will be dealt with. They need to know what behaviour is unacceptable. Parents may be particularly concerned about playtimes and activities between lessons or after school.

These are all areas where parents can become actively involved, if encouraged and supported. Parents can also bring a wide range of experience and skills to the pastoral curriculum and activities outside lessons which support and extend the school's ethos.

Not all parents will support the schools' values. But if they are clear, consistent and supported by most other parents, then many parents will accept them. If a significant minority of parents do not accept the schools values and ethos, these concerns need to be dealt with openly.

2.9 Reporting to Parents

Parents need to know how well their child is doing. Schools have a legal duty to send parents an annual report which includes:

- progress in each curriculum subject and in general
- qualifications gained, if relevant

- arrangements for discussing the report with teachers (eg parents evening)

- attendance record

- attainment in end of key stage assessments

- assessment results of the whole year group for comparison

It is essential that report are readable, informative, jargon-free and honest, including achievements as well as areas for development. Parents need to know what grades, level descriptors or key words in reports actually mean.

It is very valuable for parents to get more frequent feed back on their child's progress, although this need not take the form of a written report. It is good to encourage children to take work home to show their parents, particularly in nursery and primary school. A homework journal and record of achievement can be useful in junior and secondary school. But parents may need to be told how to be encouraging and supportive when work is brought home.

2.10 Parents Evenings/Consultations

Regular meetings between individual teachers and a child's parents are essential. It is worth while having some contact every term in order to -

- focus on each child's individual needs and development
- enables teachers to tell parents how they see their child's progress
- enable parents to tell the teacher how the child is at home, and any circumstances that may affect a child's learning
- enable parents to find out more about what is being taught, why and how
- enable parents and teachers to agree priorities or targets for the child's development

Regular consultations need careful planning. They can be spread out over a week after school or on a regular afternoon every week or held on one evening or over one afternoon and evening, to give all parents an opportunity to attend.

It is best to plan a cycle of consultations to ensure that parents get necessary information at each stage of their child's school career.

Consultations should be prepared from a parents' point of view, with clear sign-posting, timing, language support, creche facilities, refreshments, and anything else which enables them to feel welcome and at ease.

Parents should be able to talk about their child without being overheard, with an opportunity to see and discuss the child's work and any assessment of it. Records of Achievement can be helpful. Parents should be given positive feedback about what everything a child is doing well as well as areas for development. Parents can be offered strategies for supporting their child's

learning in these areas, or extending it where the child is doing well. It is worth discussing priorities or targets for the term ahead and writing these into the report. Parents and children can be encouraged to include their own assessments in any reports.

Ensure that each parent has enough time and that all parents are seen. If possible, parents should be able to make a special appointment or to have home visit. For the sake of the child's education, the regular individual consultation with parents' should be seen as important and every parent should be seen.

2.11 Curriculum Meetings

The more parents know what their children are being taught, the more they can help them learn.

Short meetings on aspects of the curriculum give parents information as well as an opportunity to ask questions and give their views. They can also be used to advise parents on how to help their children learn at home.

Curriculum meetings can be run as a 'carousel' on parents evenings, as part of the Governor's annual meeting or as a special event.

2.12 Supporting Learning at Home

Parents or carers are a child's first educator. Children are taught in school, but they learn at home. School can do a great deal to encourage parents to help their children learn.

The most effective ways of encouraging parents to help their children learn at home are to -

- constantly reinforce the message that parents' encouragement and support for their children's education is important and makes a big difference;
- offer parents advice and information on how best to encourage their children to learn, starting with pre-school preparation;
- have a clear homework policy which is consistently followed across the school;
- give every child a home-school journal with plenty of space for comments, **and to use it regularly and systematically;**
- acknowledge and celebrate parents' contributions to children's learning.

There are many specific schemes for involving parents in different aspects of the curriculum. It is important to plan and co-ordinate their use so that parents value them and are not over-burdened or made to feel inadequate.

The principle underlying these activities is that the child takes home an activity which reinforces an aspect of the curriculum and has to be explained to a parent, other adult or older sibling to involve them in the activity.

In **primary school,** learning can be supported by many activities at home:

- reading: taking books home and bringing reading material from home to school, using the public library, playing reading games
- writing notices, shopping lists, messages, letters, diaries, stories - anything and making books
- drama: creating a dressing-up box, discussing television and films, going to the theatre, joining a drama club
- maths: IMPACT schemes, playing number games
- science: SHIPS (school-home involvement in primary science), visiting the science museum
- technology: making and baking at home, tool box, crafts
- music: playing an instrument,collecting records collection, attending concerts, folk clubs
- physical education: encourage children to join a club,play games, cycle, go for walks and other activities: exercise is vital for health and learning
- geography: getting to know the area and the world
- history begins with the family story and tales behind familiar places, visiting museums and places of interest
- art: drawing and painting, visiting galleries, reading picture books
- careers education: learning about jobs of relatives, friends and neighbours
- environmental education includes growing things, keeping a pet, looking after the garden, window box or balcony

Encouraging parents and supporting children to develop an interest in all these areas outside school enables teachers to make the most of the relatively short time children are in school.

It is also worth encouraging and supporting educational activities which are not directly linked to the formal curriculum, through lunch-time activities or after school clubs. Parents can be involved in starting or running these.

In **secondary school** learning at home tends to revolve round home work, but encouraging and supporting student's own interests beyond the curriculum needs to be recognized and valued by the school and parents.

2.13 Homework Policy

"Homework" habits can start in infant school, with a picture to draw, a book to look at, something to count or a song to sing. It need not be much, but should be regular, meaningful and do-able. This helps to set routines and expectations for learning.

Giving parents a clear overview of the curriculum and what will be covered each term is one of the most helpful ways of involving them in their child's learning.

Give parents clear advice on what homework to expect, how often, how much time it should take, and how to be most helpful.

Show parents and young people that homework is valued by looking at it and giving specific feedback.

Create opportunities for homework to be done at school for young people who may have difficulties doing it at home for any reason.

2.14 Involving Parents in School

Most parents do not have time to come into school during the school day. Many parents will come if they have a specific invitation and they can make a particular contribution which is valued and worthwhile.
It is more usual for parents to come into school when children are young, but parents can be helpful in secondary schools, too. For example, parents' experience can be particularly valuable in the arts, careers education, work experience programmes, PSHE courses, vocational education or physical education. Parents may be willing to help children who need extra support with reading, maths or special needs.

To support parents' coming into school, it is worth considering the following points:

- a willing commitment from staff to welcome and involve parents
- a shared understanding of how and why parents' involvement is welcome
- support for staff in the event of difficulties with particular parents
- an open invitation, if appropriate, and a friendly reception from all staff
- information on the curriculum and how learning is organised
- an introductory process to enable parents to talk about what is involved with a member of staff and to develop mutual understanding and trust
- clear procedures for members of staff if they have any misgivings about a particular parent, in relation to child protection, personal safety, property or school policies

- knowledge of what skills and experience parents bring to the school
- receptiveness to parents' ideas and suggestions
- specific invitations or requests to help
- open staff room or other area for refreshment
- clear induction and instruction, including expectations and what to do in an emergency
- opportunities for parent helpers to meet, share experiences and learn
- encouragement for parents to continue learning
- thanks and recognition

2.15 Involving parents in class

Similar principles apply: be clear about what you want from parents and make sure you know what they can and want to offer. Take time to establish ground rules with each parent before they begin. Give them a chance to visit and observe, with a trial period before they make a regular commitment.

Give parents in class re-assurance that they are doing well.

Give prompt and tactful feedback when things are not going well.

Have an opportunity for feedback at the end of the each session.

Give thanks after each session and every term.

Invite all parents who help in class to meet together once a year or every term to share experiences, learn something together and socialize.

Keep a central log, register or diary of all parents helping in class, occasionally and regularly, to record how much time they give and what they do. Use this to acknowledge their contribution individually and publically.

2.16 Visits and outings

Similar principles apply. It is particularly important that parent helpers understand the purpose of the visit and have been involved in preparations. Parent helpers should be fully qualified and insured for any specialist help they give, such as driving. Clear procedures should be established for trips involving over-night stays, in line with child protection policies.

Make an evaluation of every visit, including views of parent helpers, children and teachers. Keep evaluations together with details of places to visit.

2.17 Parents or community room

Parents often value a space in school which is their own, for meetings, courses, activities or just to relax. Parents rooms are more common in primary schools, while secondary schools may prefer to consider a more general community room, if space is available.

When considering a parents or community room it is worth thinking about:

- when and for how long is the space available: if it may be needed as a classroom in future, how will it be negotiated and what will happen to parents/community activities?
- will it be used for any other purposes, such as storage, group work or one-to-one sessions?
- who will be the main users, what will be the main uses and at what times?
- Is it possible or desirable to have access outside school hours: what use might there be after school, at weekends, during holidays?
- what funds are available for doing up and maintaining the room?
- who will be responsible for activities in the room, liaison between staff and users, and trouble shooting?
- would any activities be unwelcome or forbidden, such as smoking?
- what are the priorities for using the room?

It is worth talking these issues through before you set up a room. Draw up an agreement about how the room will be used, priorities for use and who is responsible for what. If there is a strong commitment to set up the room, these can be talked through while it is being done, but the school has to be clear about how much power parents or other users will have over the room.

2.18 Parents as learners

For some parents, getting involved in their child's education can rekindle their own interest in learning. Parents who are learning themselves can be a really big encouragement for children to learn. But for parents whose own experience of school was not particularly good, the idea of learning may be daunting. Your school can do a great deal to overcome these negative experiences by encouraging and supporting parents' own learning.

For example, the Adult Education Service may be able to run classes at school, including English and basic education as well as a wide range of subjects. In secondary schools it is possible for adults to take examination classes alongside pupils. It is also possible to get accreditation for helping children learn in school.

2.19 Participation in Policy-Making

Encourage parents to have a real say in policies and major decisions by -

- planning participation over the year;
- identifying issues about which major decisions need to be taken well in advance;
- providing enough information for informed discussion;
- making the decision-making process clear;
- clearly identify how and when parents can give their views;
- being receptive to parent's proposals;
- supporting systematic participation through class meetings;
- recognising and involving groups set up by parents.

The policy issues which often concern the largest number of parents are sex eduction, religion, bullying, racism and equal opportunities, play times and playgrounds, uniforms and homework.

2.20 Parent-Teacher Associations

A home-school association, parent-teacher association or friends of the school can be a great support by

- organizing book weeks, arts days, environmental events, careers evenings, open days, multicultural evenings and other activities to extend the curriculum and involve the community
- running a parents' room, toy library, games bank, home-school library
- running sports days, concerts, fetes, quiz nights, dances
- organizing after-school activities for pupils
- creating a nature area or playground improvements
- setting up support groups for single parents, refugees, black parents or others who feel excluded or want to help each other for any reason.

A PTA can be counter-productive if it becomes exclusive. It is essential to make sure that all sections of the school community are equally involved. A school association based on class representatives may be more representative than an ordinary PTA (see 2.7). Fundraising and other activities can then be taken on by task groups answerable to the school association.

2.21 Fundraising and community events

Social events for staff, parents and governors help to forge relationships and strengthen home-school links. Some parents are very keen to organize events and fundraising for the school. It is well worth supporting this enthusiasm to ensure that it makes a positive contribution. It helps to have an agreed strategy and priorities for fundraising and social events which fits in with the overall plan for the school and is supported by parents. For example, to hold an annual social event for parents new to the school early in the first term, to organize a grand celebration for pupils and parents leaving at the end of the year, and one cultural or sporting event a year.

It is also helpful if fundraising targets and priorities are agreed publically. Fundraising should always be kept in proportion so that parents do not feel that the school is only interested in their money. Many parents may not be able to give any money and they should not be excluded from activities.

Fund-raising is best done in the context of a whole-school strategy for resources and parental involvement. The most valuable use of parents is their time and commitment to their child's education. Improving efficiency and saving energy can often raise more money than fundraising. But some fundraising activities are worthwhile social and community events in themselves.

2.22 Governing Bodies

The role of governors, particularly parent governors, can be encouraged by -

- providing a governors noticeboard, with a short description of each governor's role, name and photograph, minutes and agendas of meetings
- producing a newsletter, or governors' section in the school newsletter
- making annual governors' meetings interesting, friendly occasions
- providing a governors' desk at parents' evenings and other events
- giving each governor a clear role in the school and in relation to the community, such as a link with specific organizations and groups
- asking governors to represent the school conferences and functions
- inviting governors to join appropriate staff training events
- supporting governor training
- encouraging parent governors to meet together before each formal meeting
- ensuring that governors visit the school regularly and are recognised and welcomed by all staff.

2.23 Moving on: Life Transitions

The transition between stages of education and leaving school are powerful experiences for young people. Schools can help them make the most of them by involving parents to support the process.

- enabling parents and children to **evaluate** the experience of the previous stage;
- planning ahead and providing plenty of information and personal experience of what the next stage will involve;
- **phasing** the transition, with preliminary visits, projects, explorations;
- celebrating achievements of the previous stage;
- taking time to say goodbye to staff, other children and places.

Careers education and work placements is a particularly important part of moving on from secondary school, in which parents can play an integral role from an early stage, starting in primary school.

2.24 Support for staff

Most teacher training courses do not include work with parents. Where they do it is usually very little. Most teachers already work long and hard for the children they teach. Support staff are equally important for good relationships with parents.

Staff will feel better equipped to work with parents if it is:

- adequately recognized and acknowledged
- properly supported with guidelines, training and time
- properly co-ordinated, possibly with a responsibility post.

With this in place, staff are better able to involve parents and parents can support staff in the partnership of enabling children achieve their full potential.

2.25 The school-community partnership

Parents and the school are part of a wider community and network of agencies. Schools are often the first line of support for many parents. Schools can do a great deal to support parents simply by knowing who else they can turn to, in Social Services, the Forest Healthcare Trust, voluntary organizations or faith communities.

A guide or list of local agencies in the school office can be invaluable. If parents are making many demands on the school for advice, support and referrals, it probably means that they trust the school and it is doing an important job in the local area. Since schools are not funded for this work, it may be work keeping a record of all requests for help and applying for funds for additional staff-time.

Other ways of supporting the partnership with the community include -

- joint open days or evenings, for the school, community groups and local agencies to display and discuss their work
- community evenings and festivals
- encouraging community use of school premises outside school hours
- involving community groups with education at the school.

Parents are also part of the local community and may get involved with the school indirectly. The community is the most powerful medium through which the school communicates with parents.

Keeping the policy under review

Ongoing evaluation is essential for any policy. This includes everyday discussion of issues as they arise, immediate reflection and feedback after each activity involving parents and a standing item on parents on agendas (see 1.4 above). It is worth building a more systematic evaluation of specific aspects of policy into the school planning cycle on a regular basis. This might involve talking with a cross-section of parents in more depth about a particular aspect of the policy in practice, conducting a survey or observing an activity.

In order to keep the process of evaluation and review manageable, it is worth being very clear about the main aims of the policy and setting up three or four indicators which will show that they is being achieved. If appropriate, indicators could be used as targets. For example, 100 percent participation in parents consultations, completion of homework or a high level of participation in class association meetings. It is helpful if targets are achievable, or they cause demoralization, yet be something to strive for, or they may be dismissed.

3.1 Reviewing the policy

It is worth reviewing the policy in the light of evaluation, to make sure it is still relevant or needs to be amended in anyway. A review date should be part of the policy document and the school planning cycle.

3.2 What Ofsted inspections are looking for

The inspections by Ofsted, currently every four years, will also look at the school's relationships with parents. The Handbook for Inspection currently includes the references to parents under the following headings:

5.1 contribution to spiritual, moral and cultural development

5.2 behaviour and discipline: parents views on bullying, rewards and sanctions.

5.3 attendance: what information do parents get

7.2 assessment and reporting: are outcomes constructive and helpful to parents, what are the arrangements for reporting to parents.

7.3 the curriculum: the nature and contribution of homework

7.3 provision for special needs: arrangements for consulting and involving parents

7.5 management and administration: working relationships between governing body, staff, pupils and parents

7.8 links with parents and agencies: quality of parents' contribution to school life, quality of information provided to parents.

Amplification of evaluation criteria (7.8)

Good links are characterised by high levels of parental satisfaction and support, and by involvement in joint enterprises with contributing and receiving schools. Provision is made for new intakes of pupils to become familiar with the school and its routines. On transfer, information concerning pupils' progress and achievement is clearly presented in a useful format; when such information is received by the school it is used to inform the work planned for the pupils. There are positive contacts with local business and appropriate use is made of community resources. School information is well presented to all interested parties and good use is made of the local community in the curriculum. The school is used and valued by the community is serves.

Reporting to parents (7.2 Technical papers)

Good reports provide parents with a **clear picture** of their child's achievements and progress and, in particular, they will **unambiguously reflect attainment** within the National Curriculum. They manageable for teachers to produce, and not all that is recorded will be reported, to avoid providing a confusing amount of detail.

As with assessment and records, reports should have a positive effect on pupils' attitudes, motivation and self-esteem. Reports should **set targets for the**

future and help to **develop the relationship between school and parents,** by encouraging parental involvement and support. In this respect, the timing of reporting is important: interim (as well as end-of-year) reports which provide an opportunity for parents and pupils to attend to some of the matters raised in them as a sign of good practice.

Ofsted Parents Questionnaire and Meeting

The Registered Inspector will hold a meeting for parents and may send out a questionnaire to all parents before the inspection. It is worth ensuring that questionnaires are returned before the inspection starts.

The meeting for parents is the responsibility of the "appropriate authority", usually the governing body. It is held before inspection and parents should be given three weeks' notice. The headteacher, a staff member or governor may introduce the Registered Inspector (RgI) and make sure that every one present is eligible to be there. That is, parents and not education officers, governors, journalists or politicians unless they are also parents. No member of staff may be present unless they are a parent.

Ofsted Parents meeting agenda

1. Registered Inspector's Intro
2. pupils' standards of work
3. parents' part in school life
4. information provided to parents, including reports
5. help and guidance available to pupils
6. values taught by the school
7. homework
8. behaviour and attendance
9. other issues raised by parents

The Inspector gives a summary of parents' views to the head or chair of governors after the meeting.

Summary

Parents are a child's first and often most influential teacher. Schools which have the active support and involvement of parents in their child's education will improve the quality and standard of learning. They will also improve assessment/exam results and other formal measures of school improvement. Involving parents takes planning, time and effort, which needs to be recognized, budgeted for and built into the school's planning process. Work with parents needs to be evaluated to make sure that it really is supporting children's learning.

There are so many things a school could do to involve parents, it is essential to have clear priorities. Perhaps the seven things which could male the most difference are -

- **show parents that they are valued, vital partners in their child's learning**
- **give clear information about what children are learning at school**
- **encourage parents to make sure their child does some learning at home regularly every day**
- **provide support for learning at home, from home reading sessions to homework guidelines**
- **give parents enough time and information at consultation sessions to be heard and set shared targets**
- **set up class associations**
- **ensure that all parents can participate equally.**

A Summary of parents' rights in education

Compiled by Margaret Tulloch, CASE Secretary

Rights of appeal

'Choice' of school: If the child is not offered a place in the school for which the parents have expressed a preference, there is a right of appeal to the admission authority i.e. to the Local Education Authority if it is a county school or the Governing Body if it is a grant maintained or voluntary school. *Education Act 1980; Education Reform Act 1988*

Exclusion: In the case of a permanent exclusion parents have the right of appeal first to the governing body and then, if the child is not reinstated, to the LEA. In the case of a GM school the appeal is to the Disciplinary Committee, *Education (No.2) Act 1986.*

National Curriculum: In exceptional circumstances, headteachers may decide that a pupil need not follow the National Curriculum. Parents have a right of appeal against that decision to the governing body. They can also appeal to the headteacher and, failing that, to the governing body to withdraw their children from the National Curriculum assessment. ***Education Reform Act 1988***

Ombudsman: Parents and all local citizens have the right to appeal to the local Ombudsman over issues of maladministration by LEAs or Governing Bodies, for instance in the case of admission arrangements.

Special needs: Parents of children with special educational needs have a right to appeal to a special needs tribunal about a decision not to statement their child and about the statement itself. *Education Act 1993*

Secretary of State: If parents believe that the LEA or governing body has acted unreasonably or failed in their duties under the 1944 Education Act they can appeal to the Secretary of State once they have used their rights of complaint, if appropriate, under the Education Reform Act 1988. ***Education*** *Act 1944; Education Reform Act 1988.*

Rights of compliant

Complaints procedure: All LEAs must have a complaints procedure which may be used by parents to complain about unreasonable behaviour or a failure on the part of the LEA or the governing body to

- provide the National Curriculum in the school or for a particular child
- follow the law on charging for curricular activities
- offer only approved qualifications or syllabuses
- provide religious education and daily collective worship
- provide the information that they have to provide
- carry out any statutory duty relating to the curriculum

Education Act 1944; Education Reform Act 1988

Rights to make a decision affecting their child's education

'Choice' of school: Parents, including parents of a child with special educational needs, have the right to express a preference for a school. This does not give an unfettered right to choose a school. If a school is oversubscribed admission criteria set by the LEA , or for GM or voluntary Schools the governing body, determine which children will be admitted. *Education Act 1980; Education Act 1993*
Grant Maintained Status Only parents of children registered at the school have the right to vote in a ballot to apply for grant maintained status. *Education Reform Act 1988; Education Act 1993*

Special Educational Needs: Parents have a right to request a statement of special educational needs for their child and if the child has a statement that it be reviewed. *Education Act 1981; Education Act 1993*

Resolutions to the governing body: If parents equal to 20% of the number of pupils are present at the Annual Parents' Meeting they may vote on resolutions. These the governing body will have to consider if they relate to their work, or they must ask the Headteacher or LEA to comment of the resolutions relate to them. ***Education (No.2) Act 1986***

Withdrawal: Parents have the right to withdraw a child from religious education, collective worship and sex education. *Education Act 1944; Education Act 1993*

Rights to information - about their child

Exclusion: parents have the right to be informed immediately when their child is excluded. The headteacher must inform parents about the type of exclusion, the reasons for the exclusion, details of the appeals procedure and, in the case of the fixed term exclusion, the date of the pupil's return to school. *Education (no.2) Act 1986*
School record: all parents of registered pupils under 18 and all pupils aged 16 or over have the right to see the pupils' educational records. Certain information can be excluded from the record. *Education Reform Act 1988*

Schools reports and assessment results: these have to be sent at least once a year to the parents of each pupil. Reports must include:

- brief particulars of progress in each curriculum subject and in general
- qualifications gained
- details of the arrangement under which the report may be discussed with teachers at the school
- attendance record
- attainment of pupils at key stages (as specified in circulars, published regularly) If the timing of the report does not allow for assessment results to be included then they should be sent to parents with a brief explanation. *Education Reform Act 1988; Circular 6/93*
- Results of attainments in the statutory assessment sent to parents must include within school comparisons, when available.

Rights to information - about the school

Admission arrangements: details of school admission arrangements including the number of pupils intended to be admitted, the criteria for allocation of places if the school is over-subscribed and details of the appeals procedure. This is published either by the LEA or the governing body depending on which is the admission authority. *Education Act 1980*

The Annual Report and Annual Meeting with governors: The Annual Report must be sent at least two weeks before the Meeting and must include

- the date, time and place of the annual parents' meeting, its agenda and a brief description of the purpose of the meeting.
- names of the governors, their term of office, and the name and address of the Clerk and the Chair of Governors.
- information about the next election of the parent governors.
- information about the school budget and how it was spent
- in secondary schools information about the examination results.
- information about the governing body's work to strengthen links with the community including with the police.
- information about school attendance
- a summary of any changes since the school prospectus was published.
- informationon the governing body's discussion relating to opting out.
- information about the school's policy on special needs.
- an update on action undertaken as part of the governor's action plan arising from an OFSTED inspection.

All parents have a right to attend the Annual Meeting, at which the governors discuss the annual report and any other matters to do with the school. The Headteacher has the right to attend whether or not he or she is a governor. *Education (No.2) Act 1986. Schools Act 1992; Education Act 1993.*

Documents: The Headteacher must arrange for parents to have access to a range of documents. These include schemes of work, syllabuses, the school prospectus, the governing body's annual report, inspection reports about the school, DFE circulars and Statutory Instruments where available, and documents containing information about the performance of schools in the area and nationally. *Education Reform Act 1988.*

Minutes and agendas of governing body meetings: copies of the agenda, approved minutes and other papers relating to the governing body meetings must be made available to be read at the school. Confidential items will be excluded. *Education (No.2) Act 1986.*

OFSTED Report and Governors' Action Plan: A summary of the report from the inspectors following an OFSTED inspection of a school must be sent to every parent. Similarly the governors' action plan resulting from the inspection must be sent to every parent. The Annual Report to Parents should include an update on the implementation of the action plan. *Education (Schools) Act 1992*

Performance of the school: See School Reports and School prospectus (below)

School prospectus: This must include

- admission arrangements
- number of applications or expressions of preference received in the previous year
- information about the complaints procedure
- a statement about the schools's ethos and values
- for secondary schools, the destination of school leavers
- the school's name, address and telephone number
- the names of the head and Chair of Governors
- the type of school and any religious connection it has
- details of the time set aside for teaching during each school day
- the dates of terms and half terms for the next school year
- homework policy
- arrangements for children with special educational needs
- policy on school uniform
- policy on charging
- information on school performance with local and national comparisons
- information on school attendance
- curriculum information, organization and teaching methods, to include
  - curriculum aims of the governing body
  - a summary of the curriculum for each year group
  - content and organization of the sex education curriculum
  - careers education, work experience, external qualifications offered and names of syllabuses where appropriate
  - how parents and others may obtain the documents

Schools Act 1992. Information on School Performance, circulars 4/93 and 5/93.

Timing of the school day: If the governors intend to change the timing of the school day, parents must be informed of this in the Annual Report and an opportunity provided to discuss it at the Annual Meeting. Parents must be given three months notice of an intention to change school hours. *Education (School Hours and Policies) (Information) Regulations 1989*

Rights to have views of parents represented

Assessment of child's special educational needs: parents of children with special educational needs have a right to be informed and involved at all stages in the process of statementing. *Education Act 1981.*

Meeting with school inspector: Before an OFSTED inspection parents have the right to attend a meeting with the inspector primarily responsible for the inspection and to put their views. *Education (Schools) Act 1992.*

Parent governors: Parents have the right both to elect and to be elected as a parent governor. *Education Act 1986.*

This is a summary, detailed information on parents rights is available from the **Advisory Centre for Education** (ACE), Unit 1B, Aberdeen Studios, 22-24 Highbury Grove, London N5 2EA, Tel: 071 354 8321
Parents Helpline 2-5pm

Developing a whole school approach to working with parents:
Guidelines for schools in the London Borough of Waltham Forest
Written by Titus Alexander, Adviser for Community Education,
with many thanks for the contributions and comments of teachers and other colleagues.

Copies available for £5.50, incl. p&p, from
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